DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 388 CS 206 490

AUTHOR Woehlk, Heinz D.
TITLE Some Humor in the Bible.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 20p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Regional Conference of the Colorado Language Arts Society and the National Council of Teachers of English (Colorado Springs, CO, March 13-15, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Biblical Literature; *Characterization; Content Analysis; *Humor; Literary Criticism; Literary Devices; *Literary Genres; *Literature Appreciation

ABSTRACT

The Bible contains a variety of literary genres including drama, tragedy, and epic poetry, and it is an excellent basis for character study. It also contains a certain amount of humor, which should not be overlooked by students of biblical literature. Examples of intentional humor include the second version of the creation, found in the second chapter of Genesis, in which God gets the order of things backwards and creates Man before He has made the earth habitable. The characters of the biblical heroes are, on closer scrutiny, at least human if not humorous, as shown by Abraham's very bemused and undignified reaction to God's news that his 90-year-old wife will bear him a child. God Himself must have had a sense of humor to have chosen Lot to be saved, continually bailing him out of sticky situations in his quest for self-indulgence. Moses is also a most unlikely and reluctant hero, often given to whining. "Patient" Job, always ready to find fault, repeatedly demands an audience with God to plead his innocence, but runs and hides when he finally gets his chance. The whole scene of Jonah, with his martyr complex, being vomited from the belly of a whale also exemplifies the rich humor that gives the Bible its depth, timelessness, and grace. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED203388

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Dr. Heinz D. Woehlk
Assistant Professor of English
Language and Literature Division
Northeast Missouri State University
Kirksville, Missouri 63501

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Heinz D. Woehlk
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SOME HUMOR IN THE BIBLE

-by

Heinz D. Woehlk

Interest in the Bible as literature, quite apart from theology per se, as a relatively recent phenomenon has, in the small colleges around the country at least, provided English departments with one of the few remaining electives in literature that draws from the whole campus. Out of this secular approach have come numerous high school and college courses emphasizing genres found in the Bible, such as the short stories in Genesis (for example, Joseph's sojourn in Egypt, an archteypal story of rags to riches--to rags to riches; or the story within a story, that of reluctant Lot, beautifully framed by the larger adventures of Abraham); other genres include drama, perhaps even tragedy, represented by the Book of Job, which also contains some of the most powerful descriptive poetry ever written, the portraits of the horse and the eagle in particular; the various types of songs found in the Book of Psalms; the Book of Exodus, a complete epic in classical form; and several other genres.

CS206490

In addition, the Bible makes a superb basis for the literary study of character, a technique then applicable to literature of all types. The secular approach permits various other ways of looking at the Bible as well: for example, why is the style of Matthew so much more harsh than that of the other gospels? This question leads to a consideration of biographical study, and, of course, style and structure--not to mention the politics of the writer and his times.

The document approach to Bible study answers such questions as why we have two versions of the creation myth, two narrations of Noah's ark, and numerous other technical discrepancies.

For those of you who teach or will teach the Bible as Literature, here follows a little quiz that you might use on your students sometime at the beginning of a term: ask them to write down, from memory, how God created the heavens and the earth, including the creation of human beings. My experience has been that students will cite the six-step creative effort of God, followed by a rest period on the seventh day. Those who remember at all will also tell you that on his last day of work, the sixth, he formed a man out of clay and a woman out of the man's rib.

What your students will have done, of course, is mix up the quite distinct creation stories of Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis. Chapter 1 has the six-step technique, at the end of which process--animals and vegetation having already been taken care of--God creates human beings <u>together</u>: "man and woman he created <u>them</u>." Chapter 2 begins the business all over again, this time with a seemingly disoriented God performing the work, now he creates a man, then all the animals and vegetation, and finally the woman from Adam's rib.

Why most people should call to mind the six steps from one version and the separate man-and-woman scenario from another leads to a wonderful

consideration of two things: (1) why we have conflicting stories in the first place (here and elsewhere), and (2) the process of cultural assimilation that draws selectively from the pool of available information. Our modern society apparently likes the orderliness and the idea of accretively climbing the ladder of success found in Chapter 1, so we snatch up that part and throw it into our general cultural makeup; but we do not like the inescapable conclusion that God means man and woman to be equal that is an integral part of Chapter 1, so we discard that portion right away, before it has a chance to corrupt tender ears and minds, and take instead the charming and marvelously ambiguous little Adam's rib story from Chapter 2. And the indoctrination has apparently succeeded.

All these approaches--genre, documentary, biographical, historical, cultural--will amply reward the serious student of Bible as Literature. The problem is, however, that students either become too serious-minded about the Old Testament especially or bring to the class the cultural bias that does not allow us to have any fun with the Bible. It harbors a tremendous amount of humor that permits us to see a great deal more humaneness and grace on the part of the writers and compilers than the Old Testament especially is often given credit for.

Yes, the Old Testament does present a hard and limiting view of life; but because of this harsh foundation, in order to make it palatable to the average person of the Sixth Century B. C., the Priestly Editor and later redactors fortunately saw fit occasionally to make us smile. While I would not go so far as to advocate yukking your way through Sodom and Gomorrah, I would like to point out some of my favorite pieces of intentional Bible humor. Each piece provides a natural wedge into one or more of the traditional literary approaches.

Chapter 2 of Genesis reveals a God who, on the surface, betrays an alarming alacrity for getting things wrong:

> In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up--for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground--then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (2:4-7; text from Revised Standard Version, as will be all future quotations)

Incredibly, this edition of God actually made a man without any place to put him!

Here's God now, in all his glory, holding Adam in his hand like a doll, looking around for a likely spot. He does not find one. It is only then that he plants a garden in Eden--presumably with his free hand; whether his right or left shall remain forever a mystery--"and there he put the man whom he had formed" (2:8).

Notice that he does not stand back self-satisfied as he did in Chapter 1 and say to himself while he surveys his latest achievement "And it was good." He knows that he has forgotten something: Adam has nothing to eat! In verse 9, therefore, he belatedly rectifies the situation and makes several types of vegetation, one of which is for food. That's not enough, though, so he also makes trees for sight: here we have a God who displays a keen interest in aesthetics: he wants things to look nice, to give Adam some visual pleasure. (Now if we could only get the message to Washington that the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities are divinely inspired, they would have no choice except to fully fund them, and we'd be all set.)

Just born--fully grown, probably rubbing his eyes over the shock of it all--the first man who ever lived--Adam, before anything else happens to him, is immediately struck with a barrage of regulations; no sooner does God create life than he creates big government: "do this, don't do that, and under no circumstances eat the fruit of this-here tree, because I wouldn't want you to become like me."

This is a theme that God takes up again later, incidentally, when he wakes up one morning and sees all the little people climbing up a tower to heaven. Once more, he invokes his wrath and destroys the tower (or the beanstalk) and disperses people all over the earth lest they try to step outside their proper place again in the divine scheme of things.

Back to creation, though:

Having made Adam, a place for him to live, things to eat, the arts, and the all-important rules and regulations, God still has the gnawing feeling that something is missing:

> So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. (2:19-20a)

Still the feeling nags away at the Lord that something is lacking; what could it be? Why, it is woman, of course! And finally, his crowning achievement before him, the creation story is over.

It is interesting to note, by the way, that Chapter 1 climbs to progressively greater heights of creation, with human beings not only last, but therefore the best of all life; what would happen if we applied the same value system to Chapter 2, with Eve being last?

Female superiority is not so far-fetched if we examine the etymologies

of the names of this pioneering couple:

ADAM comes from the Hebrew word for MAN, ADHAM (transliterated), and the word for GROUND, ADHAMA; it is pointless, therefore, to ask precisely when Adam receives his name; he has it from the very beginning, as soon as God forms a man out of the ground. Eve's name in Hebrew means "to make life," or "she who makes life"--that is the main thing that God does: create life. In a primitive society, this talent takes on divine importance. Who is closer to godliness, then? Why, Eve is, of course.

Next up we get the origin of the time-honored practice of passing the buck. It seems that Adam has been caught red-handed with contraband goods:

> God says: "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said: "She made me do it!"--"The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said: "He made me do it," pointing to the snake--"The serpent beguiled me, and I ate."
>
> (3:11-13, with some interpolations, of course, to emphasize the point)

God then turns to the hapless serpent, who has no one to pass the buck on to. The buck stops with him.

Chapter 4 presents some difficulties. Cain slays Abel for no apparent reason: all we are told is that Cain kills his brother. Many interpretations are possible, of course, including the one that seems to have some credence, that God is a meat-eater, not a vegetarian. Remember the end of the flood story? "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart 'I will never again curse the ground because of man.'" Yes, God is a carnivore (8:20-21a).

I am not being facetious here, because, like every great national or religious book, one of the aims of the Bible was to tell people how to live;

thus sheepherding seems to be better than rooting oneself to the spot by agriculture. Why? The Hebrews had to lead a mobile life, politics in the Middle East being rather unfriendly to the Hebrews back in those days.

If you have access to it, you might dig out a copy of the extremely funny medieval English play "Cain and Abel," part of a larger cycle, most readily available in Martial Rose's excellent modern English edition of The Wakefield Plays, published by W. W. Norton and Company. In it, Abel is the type of goody-goody, ne'er-do-well, lazy, pampered favorite son whom people just love to hate. While Cain is sweating over his plow, fighting a losing battle with the rocky soil, trying desperately to eke out subsistence rations for his family, Abel stands around and watches him work, dishing out obsequious little pieces of gratuitous advice--really endearing himself to his hard-working brother therefore. This behavior provides motivation for Cain's act. What's more, this unorthodox--for us--interpretation was officially okayed by the Thirteenth-Century Church--which apparently had a sense of humor, at least for a time. As a matter of fact, the Wakefield plays (and other cycle plays, too--York and Chester, for instance) will give your students a chance to look at how other ages interpreted the same book that we read today, covering all the high points of both the Old and New Testaments.

Another place where the cycle plays embellish Genesis just a bit occurs in the story of Noah, specifically the part that would still play well today, when Noah tells his wife that God has just been talking to him.

Picture the scene: In from the fields he comes, no work accomplished this day. Apparently Noah has a pretty long history of shirking his duties, so his wife greets him with a stony expression of great skepticism when he offers as his reason for not finishing his work in the fields this time

the excuse that he has been talking with God. Well, his wife lets loose a sizeable verbal volley, and Noah just cowers in her presence. Of course the audience cheers gloriously when poor old Noah turns out to be right for once.

Back to the text itself now, we come to the Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar triangle, prior to their name changes:

> Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar; and Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" (16:1-5)

Abram wisely sidesteps this issue, because either way he would lose; therefore he defuses this potentially explosive situation by turning the matter back to his wife and says, "'Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her" (16:6). Thus Abram curiously escapes the necessity of choosing; in fact, he cops out.

Later, God tries to tell Abraham and Sarah that they will have a child of their own together. At this time, he is 99 years old, nearly a hundred, and she is <u>ninety</u>; God speaks to Abraham:

> "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

We can almost hear him adding, "Ha!"

One cannot exactly call his response regally restrained and respectful; a grown man, revered leader of his people, laughs so hard at God's words that he falls down--he is out of control with laughter. Sarah overhears this incredible news later on:

> They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." The Lord said, "I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" (18:9-12)

How ironic, she thinks; she can't believe it. The scene is wonderfully comic: Sarah, not allowed to participate in this discussion between her husband and the mysterious strangers, eavesdrops by the doorflaps of the tent and chuckles to herself. At least she doesn't laugh so hard that she falls through the door, as her esteemed husband likely would have done.

The point of all this humor so far is the very humane representations of God and his people. The Old Testament is known for its wrath of God; but it should also be known, I think, for its loving and compassionate vision.

The bumbling God of Chapter 2 really does not founder, despite appearances; after all, he takes nothing back. The God of this version of creation is a personal and anthropomorphic God, one who gets down into the dirt with us--that's how much he cares for his creatures. Unlike the distant, authoritarian, perfect God of Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 he is a lot like us; that is what makes him appealing. So the Hebrews had it both ways: a distant and a close god simultaneously. What could be better?

He is a god whom we can talk to and who talks to us on our level. He does not have to come down and ask Eve why she ate the forbidden fruit; an omniscient God already knows; he does this because he cares for his people and at once establishes a close and personal relationship with them. The literalness of the superficial clash of the two creation versions--and of other technical contradictions--therefore drops away as unimportant, leaving us with a sense of a God who does have a majesty but who also has fatherly love and compassion.

If God did not have a sense of humor himself, he certainly would not have selected our friend Lot as the one to save, the so-called upright individual in Sodo-. We can trace Lot's character back to the point when Abram and he split up the land:

> And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan valley, and Lot journeyed east; thus they separated from each other. (13:10-11)

Abram was left with the less fertile of the two places, and we have learned that Lot is a man who bears no one any ill will but who is susceptible to sensory pleasures and some selfishness. This predilection takes him away from the open spaces and inexorably leads him to the cities, into evil: "Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, while Lot dwelt in the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord" (13:12-13). Thus Lot seems to gravitate toward the pleasures of the senses. He likes the lushness of the Jordan valley (not to mention avoiding enemies in Canaan); he also is quite comfortable, apparently, among the residents of Sin City--not that he

appears to have any conscious designs of taking up the ancient occupation of hedonism himself, but only that his character seems unwittingly to draw him in that direction.

We next encounter him when he literally forces three unexpected visitors (angels of the Lord) to accept his hospitality. This overexuberant host quickly gets himself into a tight spot, since pretty soon his neighbors demand to have some fun with these guests. Lot offers up his two daughters instead. What happens then? The men whom Lot wanted to protect are forced to bail him out.

God seems to have saved Lot from himself. He is told to get out of the city while the getting is good, but he hems and haws. Finally the servants have to grab him and his family and take them out of Sodom.

You would think that he'd stop his misguided ways now; but no: like a little kid, he actually asks God if he can go to Zoar rather than live in the hills where he had been told to go: "'Behold, yonder city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one [can't be a lot of sin there!] . Let me escape there--is it not a little one?'" (19:20). The Lord grants his request, despite the lameness of his excuse.

But he is not satisfied there either and moves again. Lot had been given divine protection under the hand of God, but he does not feel it sufficient, so he wanders farther and farther away from where God permits him to be. As always, Lot is merely fainthearted--a coward and a rather reluctant walker of the straight and narrow.

To go on, let me focus on the political aspects of Lot's incest with his daughters. The writer of this section, the anonymous J (or Jahwist), must have had a lot of fun here:

At the time of composition, the two chief enemies of the Hebrews were the Moabites and the Ammonites--both Canaanite tribes. The sons born from the night that Lot's daughters got him drunk and became pregnant by him are named Moab and Ben-Ammi, and they in turn, according to J, later spawn the Moabites and the Ammonites. Thus the composer of this narrative has taken the grave sin of incest and made it the foundation of the ancestry of his two powerful enemies! The humor is consciously subtle, maybe even a bit vicious. Faceless enemies, of course, are always great sinners and barbarians.

Even Abram is not immune to human weakness; after all, he stretches the truth by passing his wife off as his sister (so that things will go well for him) and by not objecting when Pharaoh adds her to his harem in Chapter 12; and he does it again in Chapter 20, this time with King Abimelech.

Examined carefully, all the greatest heroes of the Bible turn out to be flawed--but mostly in a nice sort of way, acceptable because we recognize, to one degree or another, similar weaknesses in ourselves. The Elohist and the Jahwist, and later the Priestly Editor, knew these weaknesses to add depth to the population of the Old Testament. So God, except for a lapse or two--as when he loses his temper (he later apologizes) and nearly wipes everybody and everything off the face of the earth--for the most part smiles on his subjects and paternally overlooks their foibles with good humor. Let us take Moses as a case in point. A less likely hero of a nation, personally selected by the Lord God, there never was.

One of his youthful exploits was the killing of an Egyptian who had been bothering a Hebrew. How does he do it? "He looked [furtively] this way and that and, seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand....

Then Moses was afraid, and thought, 'Surely the thing is known'" (Exodus 2:12). Then Moses ran away. True, it was the expedient thing to do; but heroic? Never. Nevertheless, this is the man God chooses to lead the Hebrews out of slavery.

God approaches him with his plan, and Moses begs off. Well, we can chalk up the first refusal to expected modest: "Who, me, God? Aw, gee whiz!" But when God insists, Moses turns into a chronic whiner, not the sort of behavior you would expect from a savior. He continues to balk, saying that surely anyone else would do better. "Look, God," Moses finally says, clutching at last straws, "I'd probably be tongue-tied." God hires Aaron to be Moses' interpreter, and the matter is finally settled.

But each time God has a chore for him, Moses states that he would rather not. To call him reluctant is an understatement.

Later in Exodus Moses does an incredible thing. He has been on Mt. Sinai in the presence of God for forty days and nights, his people--including Aaron--meanwhile having a little last-fling relapse into paganism.

The Lord expends chapter after chapter of divine effort explaining in detail to Moses all about the Ten Commandments and other laws. In a great show of pyrotechnics he then makes the holy tablets for Moses to carry down to his people.

Moses gets down the mountain in good shape, still lugging the holy tablets intact. But he takes one look at the idolaters and throws the tablets down on the ground; they break asunder into a thousand pieces, and he breaks into a run.

The upshot of all this is that Moses has to go back up the mountain and get a second set. How ignominious! "Well, God, you see, I broke the other ones."

Overall, I do not mean to imply that Moses is a comic figure--though he certainly has his moments. He is a fallible, ordinary human being on whom God places great responsibilities. In this way he is an epic hero very much in the tradition of Odysseus. Remember Odysseus? He's the fellow who never places himself into danger when he can make his crew do it instead--the fellow who day after day, for seven long years, complains bitterly about having to be marooned on a desert island with a seductive and stunningly beautiful goddess named Calypso, who adores him, yet every night, for seven long years (he never tries to escape, you see) rather "forces" himself to make love to the comely Calypso. We wind up liking this too-human epic hero, just as the writers of the Old Testament made sure that Moses was also someone we could like, for his shortcomings as well as for his more noble qualities.

Another of the noble figures in the Old Testament is patient Job. Patient Job? Hardly! It's a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for "suffering." The moment the seven days of silent mourning are over, he rants and raves against the injustice of God. Chapter after chapter he maintains his innocence--quite rightly so, since he is innocent--and wonders what manner of God would be so cruel.

It seems that Job has three so-called friends who have come to comfort him in his hour of need. Actually, they can hardly restrain their smugness. "Look what God has done to you," they say; "you must be guilty; you must indeed be among the worst of sinners!"

They quickly assume the role that Abel plays in the cycle drama and pester him no end with their holier-than-thou diatribes. Nobody likes a know-it-all I-told-you-so.

Job stands his ground against them. At one point he says rather

sarcastically, "I suppose you think that you know it all, that wisdom will die with you? Who asked you for advice anyway?"

Meanwhile a fourth friend has been lurking in the background; he has listened to several rounds of speeches by Job and the three friends, elders of the Hebrew tribes. The fourth man--Elihu--is a young chap, however, who has experienced very little in life. His patience is about worn out around chapter 32, and he launches into a vacuous, long-winded speech: "You old guys may thing you know everything," he proclaims, "but you don't. Listen up: I may be a teenager, but I have some wisdom, too. In fact," he boasts, "I have the answers!"

His sanctimonious speech is characterized by cliche after time-worn cliche; he has nothing to say, really, and we readers soon have to laugh at him. The Elihu section was added by a priestly editor to lend comic relief. And every effective it is, too, after the unbelievable misery that Job suffers and his unheeded calls for justice. Furthermore, the Elihu insertion adds impact to what comes next: God grants Job his day in court.

For 37 chapters Job has been valiantly demanding to face his accuser, to face the God who has been so unfair to him. "Oh, if only I could speak to you, God," he has been saying, "I'd really let you have it."

God appears.

And what does Job do?

He hides! He has lost his courage! So God has to tell him to quit hiding and "gird up your loins like a man." God then runs through a catalogue of things that make him great--and it does continue for quite a long time. Some marvelous and powerful poetry comprises these chapters.

At the end of God's long speech, he says, "this is who I am. Who are you, little man, that you should contend with me?" In Job 40:2, God exclaims, "Shall a faultfinder [read "nitpicker"] contend with tne Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer!" And we can picture him regally crossing his arms in challenge.

Job then delivers himself of the shortest speech in the book. "Who are you?" God asks. "Nobody," Job meekly replies, in effect, cowering once more, so that God again has to tell him to stand up like a man and stop his infernal whimpering.

Even in a book full of tragedy, therefore, the writers and compilers of the Bible wisely included some humor. I will skip now to a book which is perhaps, on the whole, the funniest piece in the whole Bible, the Book of Jonah:

> Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:1-3)

Jonah is a reluctant prophet, to say the least. He wants nothing to do with this mission, but he has not the courage to tell God directly. Thus he boards passage on a ship to Tarshish, somewhere in Spain.

> But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god; and they threw the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought for us, that we do not perish."
>
> And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us, on whose account this evil has come upon us; what is your occupation? And whence do you

come? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

...Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Take me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they cried to the Lord, "We beseech thee, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood; for thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased thee." So they took up Jonah and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. [Thus inadvertently Jonah has converted the heathen sailors!]

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (1:4-17)

Jonah then recites a prayer of Thanksgiving--it is a psalm, really. The prayer works, and the fish vomits him out. Thereupon God tells him once again: go to Nineveh and deliver my message. This time our reticent hero obeys:

And he cried [to the king and the people of Nineveh], "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sack-cloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. (3:4-5)

Well, Jonah is simply beside himself. He is livid with rage because his prediction of destruction will not come to pass: the pagans have converted! And once again this unwilling emissary, despite all his efforts, performs conversions.

Jonah, fallible little human that he is, is angry that God has crossed him up and that his prophecy turns out wrong.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "I pray thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil." (4:1-2)

This outburst of sarcasm done with, he sulks.

He plants himself outside the city and says to God, in effect, "I'm gonna hold my breath until you overthrow Nineveh like you said you would!" God smiles and gives him some shade so he won't get a sunburn while he's busy pouting. God makes a plant for him. So we see that Yahweh can be a compassionate God--not only to the Hebrews, but also th the heathens.

Jonah, despite his folly, is rather a serious-minded egotist. He does not want God messing up his quiet life of complacency. So instead of going to Nineveh as told, he takes a Mediterranean cruise. This egotism works out rather humorously. He has a flair for the dramatic, considering himself a bit of a martyr perhaps. He thinks he can hide from God; so he dramatically takes this leisurely trip. He defies the Almighty, yet he sleeps while the tempest flares. He tells the crew, "Oh, yes, I am fleeing from the Lord Almighty!"--thus bragging a little about his station in the universal scheme of things. "How shall we survive?" they ask. "Well, throw me overboard," he gestures, probably overdoing it, perhaps thinking he'll get some mileage out of martyrdom. Later, when God saves the Assyrians after all, he's upset, because his Romantic notion of his own importance--his egotism--tells him that he has been made to look foolish. He dramatically announces that he has no further reason to live. So he makes another theatrical gesture on the desert outside Nineveh.

God plays a few tricks on Jonah, thus joining actively in the fun of this little book. God is a practical joker. He gives Jonah a shade tree, then suddenly takes it away. He teaches Jonah not to take everything

so seriously; and he teaches the Hebrews in general the same thing.

It would be nice, I think, if we took this lesson to heart and tempered the harshness that our culture sees in the Old Testament with the rich abundance of humor that is contained in it and which helps give this marvelous literary work its depth, its timelessness, its grace.

* * * * * * *